

## Joyce's Parrot

Joyce loved to carry on a dialogue about Dickens with some unknown attendant at the post-office window or to discuss the meaning and structure of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* with the person at the box office.

### Carola Giedion-Welcker, "Meetings With Joyce"

Among James Joyce's inner circle of friends was Carola Giedion-Welcker, the Swiss art critic and wife of Sigfried Giedion, author of *Space, Time and Architecture*. Mrs Giedion knew Joyce for the last ten years of his life, and her recollections of him have been a valuable source of information for biographers. She has been of critical value too. According to Declan Kiberd, the above quote is proof that Joyce only avoided discussing literature with "experts or writers" (Kiberd 3); while for Ira B. Nadel it contradicts Stanislaus Joyce's "remarks on his brother not caring for Dickens" (Nadel 75-6). She also left us puzzled, however, (or should have) by the role she played in the production of Joyce's death masks. It was her that set the ball rolling when she asked for and got permission from Nora Joyce to have a death mask made of Joyce. For some reason she ordered two masks, and, according to Maria Jolas (another member of Joyce's inner circle), had the sculptor bill Nora. "Since she was unable to pay," writes Gordon Bowker, "Mrs Giedion hung on to the masks. One of these is now at the Joyce Foundation in Zurich and the other at the Joyce Museum in the Martello Tower at Sandycove" (Bowker 1625). But why did Mrs Giedion want the masks to be made in the first place? She never said -- not directly anyway.

One day in 1937, "Frau Giedion brought [Joyce] together with the architect Le Corbusier, who had spoken of *Ulysses* as '*une grande decouverte de la vie*,'" writes Richard Ellmann. "To her dismay

the conversation turned entirely on two parakeets, Pierre and Pipi, which Joyce had recently acquired. After the meeting Le Corbusier said that Joyce was wonderful. 'But you talked about nothing at all,' said Frau Giedion. '*C'est admirable comme il parle d'oiseaux,*' said Le Corbusier, still dazzled" (Ellmann 700). Ellmann sees this as an example of "the simplicity of [Joyce's] tastes", but he couldn't be more wrong.

Le Corbusier in connection with Joyce calls to mind Daedalus, who *designed* the Cretan labyrinth;



and D(a)edalus, "the hawklike man", hints at something birdlike (*semblable à un oiseau*) about

Le Corbusier. Although the David Hockney-like glasses he always wore gave Le Corbusier an owl-like appearance (Was Joyce making fun of him perhaps?), his name brings to mind *le corbeau* and the corbie, the French and Scots for the raven or crow; and the corbie, in turn, recalls "The Two Corbies", an old anonymous Scottish ballad in which a couple of personified corbies cynically drool over the corpse of a recently killed knight. "Pierre and Pipi"? One can imagine Joyce telling Le Corbusier that the word parrot comes from *Pierre* (Peter), a derivation which would seem to put an end to any further speculation about the name of one of Joyce's parakeets or small parrots. Pierre, however, is also an anagram for *ere RIP* (before burying); and "Pipi" (*I Pip*) alludes to the hero of *Great Expectations* and, by inference, to the "two dreadful casts" or death masks that he comes across in Mr Jagger's inner office (Dickens 164).

Mrs Giedion, then, was simply doing Joyce's bidding, even down to the sculptor she would commission to make the masks, Paul Speck -- PS, postscript, letter, "the post-office window".

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